

Schools OK prevailing wages for bond work

Trustees' 5-4 vote a 'major victory,' says group's organizer.

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About 100 construction workers and labor advocates packed the Austin school district board room and applauded and cheered after trustees narrowly approved paying federal prevailing wages for work on \$490 million in voter-approved bond projects and future construction.

Trustees also agreed to conduct a study by February to find a living wage for unskilled workers, possibly adopting a hybrid wage scale in the future with higher pay for the lowest earners.

For the district to adopt the prevailing wages and move toward establishing a wage floor is a "major victory," said Jacob Cortés, lead organizer for Austin Interfaith, a

multi-issue organization of churches, schools and unions. "That is something our coalition wanted in the beginning, but not everyone was not in agreement if that was achievable. We were surprised in a significant way."

In the 5-4 vote, trustees Tamala Barksdale, Gina Hinojosa, Jayme Mathias, Ann Teich and Amber Elenz voted on Monday night for the federal prevailing wages.

Trustees Lori Moya and Cheryl Bradley said they could not support the federal wage rates because unskilled workers will be paid less than minimum wage and they wanted to pay them a living wage. Moya and Bradley said they did not want to wait until February to improve the pay for unskilled workers.

Board President Vincent Torres said there are numerous flaws in the method the federal wage determinations are established. "Just because it's

WAGE COMPARISON

Federally set prevailing wages and the Austin district's wages based on its own 2005 study:

JOB	2014 FEDERAL PREVAILING WAGE	AISD 2005 WAGE
Finish carpenter	\$27.71	\$17.97
Electrician	\$32.84	\$22.79
Plumber-pipe fitter	\$37.43	\$23.19
Bricklayer	\$13.25	\$21.12*
Painter-drywall finisher	\$9	\$15.27
Carpet installer	\$10	\$15.65

done by the Department of Labor doesn't mean it's any better than the study we've done," he said. "We have a responsibility to pay just wages, social justice as some people refer to it, but we also have a responsibility to our taxpayers not to overpay for any commodities or services that we hire. In this particular case, I think we've gotten

The labor advocates in recent weeks had repeatedly called for the federal prevailing wages established under the Davis-Bacon Act, which apply to contractors and subcontractors working on public buildings or projects.

"Affordability is a huge issue here," said Jeremy Hendricks, business manager for the Laborers' International Union of North America. "We have a lot of people who can't afford to live in Austin, but they build our schools."

The Austin school district currently pays laborers wage rates based on a 2005 district study. Work to be performed this summer on a handful of small projects will be paid based on a 9-year-old district wage study that pays some workers \$10 an hour less than the federally determined prevailing wage for the Austin area.

However, for other trades, the 2005 district

wages are actually higher than the federal prevailing wages, which were updated for 2014 for Travis County. Because of the inconsistencies, some construction workers told trustees they would prefer for the district to conduct a new study and set its own rates.

About \$349 million in projects, the majority of the 2013 bond, are repairs and renovations, such as plumbing work or replacing air conditioning. Such work is scheduled for every campus in the district. The federal wages can be applied immediately to work on projects that soon will have the green light to begin.

The district does not anticipate exceeding any project budgets, because estimates for bond construction already include contingencies for inflation and rising costs.

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